

“Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality
In South-East Europe”

Phase 1

Summary of National Research Reports

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Acknowledgements

This summary is based on research results reported in September/October 2008 by seven out of the eight national teams involved in the OSI/ESP Project “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe”. In addition, this summary draws on a preliminary draft of a paper by Daniel Pop and Steve Powell¹, members of the Project’s Central Research Team; both have been intensively involved in the design of the Project from the start, and their careful analysis of available results is a useful touch-stone against which the national survey results can be tested. Their kind permission to make use of some of their findings is gratefully acknowledged.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CEPS Centre for Education Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

OSI/ESP Open Society Institute/ Education Support Program

OSI Open Society Institute

SEE South-East Europe

¹ Daniel Pop and Steve Powell, “School principals’ perceptions on parental participation in school life.” Draft in progress, dated October 2008.

Preface

A survey of primary school principals' attitudes towards parental participation in school life was carried out simultaneously in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. The qualitative research consisted of a series of *focus group* meetings held in each country², followed by quantitative research based on a survey questionnaire designed by the central research team and piloted to test its reliability, validity and feasibility.

Survey (questionnaire) data were collected using two-stage random sampling. In the first stage, in each country the relevant strata were identified (i.e., urban vs. rural, and distribution by region). In the second stage, random sampling was applied to ensure equal probability of selection of schools within each stratum. For school stratification by region, the aim was to reflect regional distribution in the population of schools. Detailed documentation of methodologies used for each stage is set out in Project documents generated by the central research team, and discussed at a series of plenary meetings with the national teams during 2007 and 2008.

The professional public opinion survey agencies³ were contracted to do the field work in accordance with the design developed for each country (see Table 1, below). With the exception of Albania and Serbia, the response rate from the initial sample was above 90%, which indicates a high level of reliability of the survey data. The full analysis of the survey data is presented in the Project's "Survey Research Report".⁴

² The results of the focus group discussions are summarized in Crighton, J. 2008. *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE: Summary of Focus Group Discussion Reports*. Internal report to OSI-SEE. Cambridge: May 2008.

³ Growth for Knowledge, Serbia conducted the survey in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; IMAS, Romania was contracted for the field work in Moldova and Romania

⁴ Available upon request from CEPS (Centre for Educational Policy Studies), University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education

Subsequently, each team was asked to write a report about their findings. To ensure that these national reports would cover a similar range of topics, a sample outline was proposed to guide the report writers. Reports were due in early September 2008, but some arrived much later (October and November). All seven “executive summaries” (where available) were then translated into English, to form the basis for this overview of findings.

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Introduction

The three-year project "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe" has several phases. The first phase includes empirical research in eight SEE countries, to discover elementary school principals' attitudes and views in relation to the involvement of parents in various aspects of school life, such as school-level policy decision-making, extra-curricular activities, and the education of their own children, for example through direct contact with their child's teacher or other members of the school staff.

The main objectives of the first phase are to --

- (1) better understand how stakeholders (e.g., parents) are engaged in school-level governance, by carrying out national surveys of school principals;
- (2) support sustainable initiatives that enhance stakeholders' participation in school governance.

This summary of the seven national research reports pertains only to the first objective, but it is expected that the second objective (sustainable initiatives) will be supported by the findings of the empirical research.

The Legal and Policy Context

All seven participating countries have introduced reforms in education that emphasize a shift in decision-making power from the centre to regional and local levels. They also, to a large extent, have referenced their Constitutional and legal frameworks to "international standards", and to important conventions such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, some countries participating in this Project are members or candidate-members of the European Union, and as such must comply with certain legal and policy norms.

Common features of current education systems in SEE are therefore (1) greater recognition of parental and student rights in making choices; (2) more responsibility placed on local and school authorities to "run" their schools; and (3) mechanisms to ensure that schools are held accountable to stakeholders (including parents and students) for the quality of education they deliver. All three of these features imply greater public participation in what happens in schools. In the seven Project countries, the actual *level* and *content* of this participation vary considerably, and Phase 1 of the Project is designed to investigate these variations.

It should be noted that in several countries there is a distinction between parents who serve as representatives on an overall "**School Board**" which has a certain legal status, and parents who form a "**Parents' Committee**" or "**Parents' Council**" where all members are parents (in most cases, these bodies have no formal or legal status).

Key Issues Investigated by the National Surveys

In what way, and to what extent, are parents involved in the life and work of the school? Two sub-themes are (1) the level and nature of *parental* “activism” (initiative from the side of parents) and (2) the level and nature of the *school’s* “activism” in involving parents in partnerships beneficial to the school.

The attitudes and views of a sample of elementary school principals towards parental involvement, in particular with regard to sub-theme (1) (“parental activism”).

Approach, instruments used, and methodology

While there is voluminous documentation about the development of instruments and protocols to be used in the survey, it may be useful to recapitulate here the basic design of the study.

Table 1: Sample design and confidence levels ⁵

| Country | Sample design | |
|------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Albania | Stratification by region reflects regional distribution in the population of schools. Urban/rural distribution in the sample is proportional to the distribution of schools in the population. The schools were chosen randomly according to the distribution in the territory proportionally. The schools were grouped also according to urban/rural distribution. | CL: 95% CI: ±5.06 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Sample stratification was done by region and type of settlement. The sample is disproportional due to the specific characteristics of the education system, which differs among entities, in order to include a sufficient number of schools with Croatian NPP | CL: 95%. CI: |

⁵ Source: Project documentation; and Pop, D. and Powell, S., paper under preparation, draft dated September 2008.

| | | |
|---------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| | (national group of subjects/ curriculum). Urban/rural school distribution in the sample is 65:35, while in the total population it is the other way around. | ±5.69 |
| Kosovo | The sample is two-staged, stratified into three regions. Stratification by region was done to reflect regional distribution in the population of schools. Urban/rural distribution in the sample is proportional to the distribution of schools in the population. Within each region the survey was conducted in a number of municipalities that are representative for primary school population. | CL: 95% CI: ±5.0 |
| Macedonia | Sample stratification was done by region and type of settlement. Schools' stratification by region was done proportionally to total population distribution. | CL: 95%. CI: ±4.61 |
| Republic of Moldova | Sample stratification was done by region and type of settlement. Schools' stratification by region and type of settlement was done proportionally to total population distribution. | CL: 95% CI: ±3 |
| Montenegro | Because Montenegro has a relatively small number of schools, a census of all primary schools was conducted (no sampling) | |
| Romania | Sample stratification was done by region and type of settlement. Schools' stratification by region and type of settlement was done proportionally to total population distribution. | CL: 95% CI: ±3 |
| Serbia | Sample stratification was done by region (four regions) and type of settlement. Schools' stratification by region was done to reflect regional distribution in the population of schools. The urban/rural distribution in the sample is proportional to the distribution in the population of schools. | CL: 95%. CI: ±6.33. |

Source: D. Pop and S. Powell, in preparation, draft dated October 2008.

Summary of Findings

Each national survey report shows both the main statistical findings and a description of more “subjective” (but often revealing) issues that emerged from interviews with school principals. The reports vary a great deal both in their length and in their detail. Thus, a reader interested in a particular national survey is advised to consult the complete report (available from CEPS); what follows here is based on the executive summaries of all reports.

Cross-country overview of survey questionnaire findings

Parents supporting schools

It is a truism that a school will benefit from the support of parents who take an active interest in its work. It is also no surprise that these parents will primarily be interested in matters that directly affect their *own* children, and less so in broader issues such as curriculum policy, working conditions for staff, or next year’s budget; or that most principals will perceive parents’ involvement as having a positive effect not only on the achievement of students but also on the overall “climate” of the school and on relations between the school and the wider community.

The analysis of survey results across all seven countries does indeed bear this out: Principals say that (on the whole) they **welcome parental involvement** and are, “to some extent” or even “a large extent”, **satisfied** with the contributions made by Parent Councils as well as by individual parents.⁶

Looking more closely at schools’ efforts to engage parents, however, it appears that not only are invitations to participate limited to a small number of informal and formal occasions, but that only a small proportion of parents actually respond to such invitations. At formal meetings, for example, in over 75% of cases, only about one quarter of parents attend.

⁶ D. Pop and S. Powell, *op.cit.*, Figure 2.

Common finding 1: There are clearly barriers to participation on both sides.

In all participating countries, principals said that the limited involvement by parents is due mainly to parents' –

lack of interest,

lack of time,

lack of communication skills⁷.

On the other hand, it also became clear -- not only during interviews with principals, but also in the focus groups—that school principals in all countries agree that parents should participate in *school decision-making* only when specifically invited to do so. This even applied to Parent Councils, although in many cases these are mandated by law, with the implicit expectation of increasing parental power over the running of their schools.

Common finding 2: Principals *and* possibly parents share the view that important educational and management decisions should be the domain of the school and/or other education authorities, and that parents' contributions (even when invited) should not overstep the line between educational authority on one side and help with extra-curricular activities, fund-raising, or maintenance of facilities on the other.

Schools supporting parents

The survey also asked about services offered by schools to help parents, for example by providing guidance in how they can help their children with homework or by setting up support groups for parents in difficult circumstances.

The findings show that many schools do not offer such services to parents, although there are important variations among countries and among urban and rural schools. Rural

⁷ This is not just a matter of “language”. Parents may also not have much experience or confidence in their ability to speak at meetings or challenge the authority of principals and teachers. The perceived *power distance* between the school leadership and the parents may make parents feel that their opinions have, in the end, little influence on decisions.

schools, especially those in communities that are socially disadvantaged, are *more* likely to reach out to parents and use the school as a basis for community services.

Table 3: Parenting services offered by schools in the last school year: % of schools not offering the service to parents at all

| % not offering the service | Albania | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Kosovo | Macedonia | Moldova | Montenegro | Romania | Serbia |
|---|---------|------------------------|--------|-----------|---------|------------|---------|--------|
| School sessions to help parents assist their children with homework | 18.84% | 6.4% | 29.9% | 24.7% | 3.4% | 17.9% | 13.3% | 38.6% |
| Materials provided for parents to help their children with homework | 42.4% | 31.2% | 73.3% | 47.2% | 13.7% | 32.4% | 26.6% | 54.4% |
| Materials provided to monitor children's homework | 49.5% | 36.3% | 71.3% | 46.9% | 16.4% | 33.1% | 35.4% | 57.2% |
| Information provided to parents on creating a home learning environment | 29.2% | 6.4% | 34.0% | 16.2% | 3.1% | 4.1% | 6.4% | 16.3% |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Counseling service to parents | 35.4% | .8% | 31.0% | 13.7% | 3.7% | 15.9% | 24.3% | 32.7% |
| Support groups for parents. | 20.4% | 14.9% | 37.8% | 26.5% | 15.3% | 8.3% | 31.2% | 20.7% |

Source: D. Pop and S. Powell, op.cit., Table 6.

Common finding 3: Schools could do much more in terms of outreach to parents and to the community, but many do not see the need for this or say they “do not have the time or resources.”

Some observations about the survey questionnaire findings

Several national reports (Romania, Kosovo, Macedonia) make reference to a lack of a participatory “culture” in their country, and lack of a historical tradition of parents -- or the general public -- influencing the way schools are run. This raises an important question: *To what extent is the notion of active parental participation in fact socially acceptable in the region?* This project, and its objectives, are based on a tacit assumption that parental influence is by definition a “good thing”, and that therefore the aim must be to have more of it.

This may well be true, as experience in many countries around the world bears out. However, it is notoriously difficult to persuade people to do things they basically don’t *want* to do, or see *no benefit* in doing. Judging from the responses reflected in all seven national reports, there is no overwhelming enthusiasm (on either the schools’ or the parents’ side) for more active participation. In fact, Romania’s national team reports that:

“The general picture shows **a growing divide between school and community**. Principals accuse parents of a lack of interest, but at the same time they do little to involve parents in school life. Most principals say they are in favour of parents’ involvement in decision-making but when asked about concrete areas, they prefer to keep parents away from important decisions about the content of education, human resource management, and budget.”

There are sound historical reasons for this (typically European) view of a division between home and school. By contrast, in America, where the school system grew organically along with the early colonies and the gradual move westward, each new settlement built its own school house and hired and paid its own teachers. From the start, the school “belonged to

the people”, in a way that was never the case in Europe. In Europe, education at first belonged to the church (for the education of clergy and lawyers), and then to the state, as industrialization created a demand for a skilled labour force, giving rise to compulsory mass education laws. Thus the schools did not, historically or culturally, “belong to the people” in ways that would form the conceptual basis for parental participation in the running of schools.⁸

It is then no surprise that, in several of the survey countries, the notion of parent activism is viewed with considerable puzzlement, by parents and by schools and teachers. It will take time, and mutual good will, before both sides will feel comfortable with it and will be able to come to a working compromise.

As noted above, people are unlikely to invest time and energy in a participatory process unless they see that it will produce clear benefits for their schools, for themselves, or for their children.

Obviously, parents will be more inclined to be involved if they see a direct benefit for their *own* children, but when it comes to larger issues related to other parents’ children or the management or resources of the entire school, their interest fades.

Equally, principals and teachers will be more likely to welcome parents’ involvement if they see a direct benefit to their work in the school, for example in terms of financial support or help with class events. They will be less welcoming when they see parents as “interfering” in what they see as their legitimate domain, and indeed in their accountability to higher education authorities: parents, however well meaning, *are not fundamentally accountable* for the quality of education the school delivers, and for that reason they should not play a dominant part in policy decisions. Parents cannot be “fired” for poor performance or disruptive behaviour.

In all surveyed countries, there are Parents’ Councils or Parents’ Committees of various sorts. In some cases there are also School Boards, made up not only of parent

⁸ Of course this is an over-simplification. In fact in Europe the earliest *compulsory* education laws were for the children of “paupers”, so that they would not become a burden on the state; there were also laws requiring unemployed adults to become apprenticed or indentured, to learn a trade and stay out of prison or the work-house. Some states therefore took a very utilitarian, “social engineering” role in education.

representatives but of school officials, teachers, and sometimes other community representatives such as prominent citizens and business leaders. These are useful instruments to overcome the divide between home and school, but only if both sides are willing to take on more responsibility, and also more willing to share the risk.

The key to improving parents' participation is for schools to do more to make parents feel they have a genuine, *valued role as partners* in their children's formal education. If parents feel they are marginalized to organizing outings, or invited only when the school needs money, they will not be willing to make an effort. When principals complain that parents are "not interested" or "have no time", perhaps they should look carefully at how they can make involvement more "interesting" or "worth-while" for their parent-partners. Children will benefit if they do.

Statistical Measures and Analysis

As noted earlier, a full statistical analysis of the overall survey results is presented in the “Survey Research Report”, available from CEPS. Some *key variables* are shown in Table 2. The table shows that, in relation to school characteristics, there are differences in the average number of children enrolled; in general, urban schools have more students than rural ones. The country with the highest mean is Bosnia and Herzegovina (681), while Moldova has the lowest mean (159).

As for characteristics of principals, there are important variations across the countries in terms of the amount of time principals spend on teaching. In Montenegro 86.2% and in Serbia 85.5% of principals reported that they had no teaching obligations. In contrast, in Romania 51.8% and in Moldova 41.5% of principals reported they spent at least 50% of their time to teaching. This will affect the time principals have available to develop school-community partnerships, although it also means they have close contact with students on a daily basis and will probably have more opportunities to interact with those parents whose children they teach.

In addition to the key indicators presented in Table 2 below, statistical analysis was carried out in relation to a number of *composite variables* that each capture a given dimension of the mediating factor. For example, given that school principals have a range of attitudes and beliefs about parents’ involvement in school life, the outcome variables were grouped into three main composite indicators, namely: (1) the principal’s belief in the importance of parental voice in school life, (2) the principal’s satisfaction with Parents’ Council meetings, and (3) the principal’s satisfaction with the individual contribution of Parents’ Council members. In the case of school efforts to actively engage parents, three composite measures were identified, i.e. (1) Parents’ Council participation in school decision-making (five variables), (2) invitations to parents to take part in school-related activities (seven variables), and (3) school-home communication (nine variables).

Four composite measures were used to assess the practice of parental participation in school life: (1) the perception of the principal about the influence of parents on school life, (2) the influence of the Parents’ Council, (3) parental participation in school decision-making, and (4) the proportion of parents who engage in school-related activities.

All composite measures used in the analysis were standardised, ensuring that items are in numerical agreement within the other attributes of the variable (e.g. by eliminating non-responses and refusals).

Findings of statistical analysis

High levels of consistency were found for all countries and all composites, with two exceptions – *barriers to parental participation* and *the proportion of parents who participate in school decision-making*. On the other hand, for seven composite indicators

the scores for all countries were high (above or well above the cut-off point of .70), in particular with regard to the perception of principals about the benefits of parents' participation. The consensus across countries appears to be that schools do benefit from active involvement by parents, although this positive consensus is not always matched by actual practice (see below).

Table 2: Characteristics of schools

| Variable | Albania | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Kosovo | Macedonia | Moldova | Montenegro | Romania | Serbia |
|------------------------|---------|------------------------|--------|-----------|---------|------------|---------|--------|
| Area, urban, % | 23.7 | 60.8 | 17.3 | 60.5 | 10.5 | 38.6 | 25.2 | 49.5 |
| No. of students (mean) | 449 | 681 | 648 | 729 | 159 | 514 | 274 | 450 |
| No. of students (log) | 5.79 | 6.34 | 6.19 | 6.38 | 4.94 | 5.61 | 5.18 | 5.86 |

Source: D. Pop and S. Powell, op.cit., 2008

Summary of results by country

The following section is based on executive summaries of the reports produced by each of the seven country teams. These summaries were provided -- in English -- to the present author, and they vary in the level of detail they contain. A reader interested in knowing more about a particular country's results is advised to consult the *full* national report, available from CEPS.

Albania not available at the time of writing

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- In BiH, sample stratification was done by region and type of settlement (urban/rural). The sample is disproportional due to the specific characteristics of BiH's education system (which differs among entities) in order to include a sufficient number of schools with Croatian NPP (national group of subjects/ curriculum). Urban/rural school distribution in the sample is 65:35, while in the total population it is the other way around.
- The response rate for the initial sample of 224 schools was 94.5%; an additional sample of 13 schools brought the response rate to 100%. Thus, a total of 237 principals responded. At the end of the general survey questionnaire used by all countries, a further set of questions was added about topics specific to BiH.
- The mean number of students per school in the sample was 681. Nearly 60% of school principals interviewed said they had no teaching duties at all; only 2.1% spend more than three-quarters of their time teaching students.

Summary of findings, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Forms of participation in BiH schools do not extend to parental influence over education, or to the running of the school in anything but extra-curricular matters. Parental involvement is focussed on organisation of events, renovating buildings, tidying the school yard etc. But these forms of engagement are not to be disparaged, especially where educational resources are limited.

Principals are well aware that less well educated and otherwise socially disadvantaged parents participate less in all aspects of school life.

Quite a large number of principals feel themselves drastically under-resourced and cut off from support from the Ministries. Their schools tend to have lower levels of parental participation.

Many schools have quite frequent, but limited, contact with parents. However this contact is mainly one-way -- from school to parent -- such as sending information about student performance and school activities. Parents are also invited to parents' meetings, at which attendance is relatively good overall. However, there are groups of parents who rarely attend.

In general, principals are not convinced that parents *should* have much influence in their schools, and that participation should be limited to areas such as the planning of social activities. They do not see parents as being competent to influence *educational* decisions. Parents' Councils, on the other hand, are given more powers: at least over general policy, but again only a very small minority of principals consider their Councils competent to influence (for example) the content of lessons.

In BiH, parents participate more in bigger schools that consider themselves relatively well resourced, and in which the principal is convinced of the value of participation. These schools are better at encouraging and assisting parents to support their own children's education, with a range of activities that can be called "home-school activities" or "parenting services".

Surprisingly, principals who spend more of their time teaching seem to be more open to home-school activities, even though it is larger schools that tend to encourage these activities and principals of larger schools also tend to spend less of their time teaching.

These schools in turn more frequently communicate with parents, and more frequently invite them to the school. These activities seem to be a bridge between school and family. *Unfortunately, the majority of principals are not convinced of the value of such activities.* Such schools also give more power to the Parents' Councils, which function as another bridge.

The first piece of good news is that those schools - where Parents' Councils have more power and parents are invited more often to participate - actually experience a higher level of participation, as measured by the proportion of parents attending meetings and other events, and as measured by the influence which principals attribute to parents and their Council.

The second piece of good news is that principals in these schools are also in general satisfied with parental participation and the influence of the Council and are more convinced of the importance of listening to the parental voice, which in turn feeds back into their perception of the benefits of participation.

A key variable is the negatively-expressed indicator “perceived barriers to school support for parents”, which perhaps expresses a fatalistic or cynical view of the possibilities. There are two-way negative connections between this attitude and frequent and inclusive participation.

Summary of recommendations (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Investigate further why principals who spend a larger proportion of their time teaching seem to be more open to home-school activities, a key prerequisite for participation.

Consider ways to encourage principals even in large schools to spend some time teaching.

The most important link in the chain is the extent to which a principal is convinced of the potential benefits of parental participation. It may therefore be good to consider ways to demonstrate to principals how parental participation can *benefit* them and their schools. This could be done by disseminating best-practice “stories” produced by other principals.

It is probably too early to expect genuine participation of parents in school-level (policy) *decision-making* at this stage. Realistic initiatives which could work and gain the support of both parents and principals are:

Include parents in home-school activities around the education of their children;

Include parents in activities which can *visibly* benefit the school;

Encourage principals to widen the remit of the Parents’ Council;

Find ways to extend participation to parents who are otherwise excluded (especially the poor) and ways to include parents who are very busy, i.e. provide opportunities that do not demand much time but could be useful in other ways.

Kosovo

- The survey included a sample of 539 primary and lower secondary school principals in Kosovo. The sample is divided into three geographic regions: Center, Southeast and West. The stratification is based on regions, in order to accurately reflect the regional division of the school population.
- Within each region, representative municipalities were analyzed, as well as the school population of the region. Schools were selected randomly, in two categories: urban and rural. The error margin is below 5%.
- The instrument used was the Project's common questionnaire, completed during face-to-face interviews with selected school principals. To make the survey results more productive (in terms of drawing *conclusions* on parents' participation in decision making in education), the questions or variables have been summarized in four broader fields:
 - 1) School actions to engage parents in school life,
 - 2) School principals' attitudes on the engagement of parents in school life,
 - 3) Objective and subjective barriers to school-parent partnerships,
 - 4) Best practices of successful parental participation.

Summary of findings (Kosovo)

This appears to have been the most comprehensive survey of school principals ever done in Kosovo. This survey targeted 41% of the primary schools of Kosovo, where 44.6% of the students are taught and 42.2% of teachers are employed. Thus, it is safe to assume that the results of the research can be generalized for the entire population of schools in Kosovo.

Individual communication with parents is key to parental inclusion in school life. Based on the results of the survey, this communication is mainly one-way (school to parent), and parents are expected to listen rather than express an opinion. Half of all surveyed schools do not use any systematic tools to find out about parents' opinions/attitudes; this shows that parents have limited opportunities to influence the school environment. And even where parental surveys *are* used, data processing and analysis are done superficially and do not always serve the intended purpose.

About 60% of the surveyed principals expressed concerns about the quality of parents meetings organized by school teachers, whereas 75% confirmed that schools did not have

strategies for communication with parents. Clearly, there is a need to set some norms in communication with parents, and also in building capacities of school personnel to establish effective communication to improve overall teaching and learning. School principals perceive *lack of parents' interest* and *lack of time* as the main barriers to participation; 54% of the principals consider that teachers do not lack specific skills in working with parents. However, this appears to contradict many principals' discontent with the quality of teacher communication with parents.

There seems to be the willingness of the parents to take part in different school activities, but 39.7% of the surveyed principals say that parents do not engage enough; this shows again that efforts need to be made to reach out to parents and build their capacity to contribute to the school's work. Moreover, in 35.9% of the schools in the survey, parents do not *financially* support school activities. This may be due to the perception that schools are, and should be, publicly funded, but it can also be due to difficult living conditions of the communities involved. Indeed, there is not enough transparency in how parents' financial contributions are actually *used*, so parents are hesitant to give money "on trust".

Principals think that parental participation in school life is of great benefit. Only 1.7% of the respondents say that parental participation "has no impact at all" or has a "very small impact" on improving the school environment; the great majority think that it has "a large impact" or has an impact "to some extent". This fits with data showing that 85.6% of the surveyed principals were able to recall successful partnership with parents, most of which were infrastructural projects.

In practice, schools do offer some support for parents towards their parental care for their children. This helps parents in supervising their children while they do their homework, and also helps them take part in extra-curricular activities. Meanwhile, school directors have a very positive attitude towards the *idea* to offer such support for parents, even though they admit that, because of various reasons, they are not able to do so. For instance, 73.3% of the principals say that their school does not offer materials to parents so that they can help their children with homework, whereas 71.1% consider that such a step would be of great benefit to learning outcomes. (Only 3.1% think that it would not have a positive effect.) However, principals say that they are constrained by lack of resources and by lack of parents' interest.

Principals say that Parents' Councils have a positive effect on school governance, with 60% saying the effect is positive "to a large extent" and 35% saying the effect is positive "to a limited extent". Councils engage in all forms of decision making in schools, including teaching and extra-curricular activities. However, when principals were asked to offer *practical examples* of initiatives from the Parents' Councils, they only reported initiatives for improvement of infrastructure. Clearly, there is a strong case for strengthening the capacity of Parents' Councils.

Analysis of principals' responses shows that general impact of parents in schools is "average" in more than 50% of Kosovo schools, while in 25% of cases the impact is great. Nevertheless, because these responses reflect principals' *perceptions* (rather than actual practice), we cannot come to a clear conclusion about the real impact of parents on school life.

Summary of recommendations (Kosovo)

For schools:

Develop procedures for meetings with parents, specifying the dynamics, preparation and content of such meetings. Group/thematic meetings should become a practice as well as individual meetings with parents. Teachers should be trained to manage different types of meetings and their use to advance teaching and learning.

Raise parents' awareness of their role in the school, and train them to exercise such a role. Organize awareness-raising campaigns and other activities to build capacities of the parents to play a meaningful part.

Help parents to improve their children's learning, by providing various materials to guide them or by arranging informative sessions or training.

Pay special attention to building the capacity of Parents' Councils (and parent representatives on school governing bodies) to take an active part in decision-making.

For the governmental sector:

Implement the measures stipulated in the *Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education in Kosovo 2007-2017* to support parents at the national and other appropriate levels. The Kosovo Education Parents' Council, a body foreseen by the Law, should be re-activated and necessary support for its operation should be provided.

Continue with financial decentralization to the school level by increasing responsibility of schools for managing their own finances and ensuring transparency in how financial contributions of parents are managed and used.

Encourage schools to improve communication with parents, by supporting professional, governmental, and non-governmental institutions in developing practical manuals and guidelines to make this happen.

For the non-governmental sector:

Work on raising parents' awareness of their role in the school and other levels of community life. Awareness raising activities should be organized, not only in schools but also at municipal, regional and national levels.

Build the capacities of parents' associations to influence all aspects of school life. These associations should be trained to work with parents and their representatives in schools, so that they are equipped to take on more responsibility for the quality of the school and what it provides for their children.

Highlight existing "good practice" of parental inclusion, by creating opportunities for other schools to benefit from these good examples.

MACEDONIA

This research consisted of a survey of principals in 200 schools, as well as focus groups. A two-step sample was designed, according to regions and urban/rural location. Rural schools tend to have fewer students; thus their part in the sample is 40% (vis-à-vis urban schools' 60%).

In Macedonia, the legal groundwork for parents' involvement is provided by a number of documents, such as the National Program and the Law on Primary Education. In the "*National program for development of education 2005-2015*" the parent/school partnership status is affirmed, the inclusion of the parents in the process of education is encouraged and organized, the participation of the parents is supported and new models for co-operation are invited.

Summary of findings (Macedonia)

The main finding is that, at present, there is little more than "basic" communication or formal co-operation between parents and primary schools in Macedonia.

Parental participation in their children's schools is a relatively new idea in this country. During the 1980's, data emerged that showed a positive correlation between parental involvement and school quality. But thus far little has been done to ensure that parents are properly informed and invited to participate.

There have been a few projects related to this issue,⁹ some relating to support for parents and teachers, and some to strengthening the role of Parents' Councils. The introduction of 9-year compulsory elementary education has also provided an opportunity to communicate more with parents.

However, the parent/school link is not sufficiently strong in today's education system. In fact, we believe that parents are "the missing link", and that their inclusion (or absence!) has an important effect on the quality of Macedonia's schools.

⁹ Most of the projects done are connected with the Catholic Relief Services supported by USAID.

First, many principals think that the most urgent problem in the schools is related to children’s general *upbringing*, for which parents obviously have the main responsibility. Second, schools find it difficult to establish successful links with exactly those parents whose children are having problems in school. Now that many parents work very long hours – as much as 9 or 10 hours a day -- even those who are willing to come and participate, cannot manage to find the time. Third, the formal functioning of school management bodies (Parents’ Council, School board) is also difficult for parents to participate in. In a focus group discussion, one principal said that “*if you manage to bring the parents to school at least once a month, you have done a great job*”.

Asked what they think about the advantages and benefits of the parents’ inclusion, believe it improves “very much” the school’s overall atmosphere (54%), the students’ attainment (53.5%), more positive parental attitudes towards the school (51.5%) and greater support of the parents for the schools (49.5%).

When asked to what extent parents should have an influence on school matters, most principals said that such involvement was “very important” for teacher evaluation (46.5%), decisions at the classroom level (43.5%) and the development and improvement of school rules (42%). “Partially important” were: parents taking part in planning social activities (43.5%), and school-level decision-making (42.5%). There is less enthusiasm for parental input in the hiring and firing of teachers (12%), determining the school’s budget priorities (14.5%) and selection of textbooks (20%).

But looking more closely at what the schools are actually *doing* to include parents, we see a rather different picture, as Tables 5 and 6 show:

Table 5: How often in your school, if at all:

| | At least once a month | At least once a quarter | At least once a semester | Not at all | Don’t know | Total |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| a. are school director–parents meetings organized? | 32.0 64 | 46.5 93 | 18.0 36 | 3.0 6 | 0.5 1 | 100.0 200 |
| b. is written evaluation of student’s performance sent | 11.5 | 52.5 | 21.5 | 12.0 | 2.5 | 100.0 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|-----|-------|
| to parents? | 23 | 105 | 43 | 24 | 5 | 200 |
| c. is information on curriculum sent to parents? | 3.0 | 21.0 | 37.5 | 36.5 | 2.0 | 100.0 |
| | 6 | 42 | 75 | 73 | 4 | 200 |
| d. is information on school events and activities sent to parents? | 15.0 | 38.5 | 27.0 | 17.5 | 2.0 | 100.0 |
| | 30 | 77 | 54 | 35 | 4 | 200 |
| e. is information on school policies and regulations sent to parents? | 9.0 | 30.0 | 33.5 | 25.0 | 2.5 | 100.0 |
| | 18 | 60 | 67 | 50 | 5 | 200 |
| f. is a school newsletter sent to parents? | 2.0 | 3.0 | 15.5 | 73.5 | 6.0 | 100.0 |
| | 4 | 6 | 31 | 147 | 12 | 200 |
| g. do teachers or professional support personnel make home visits? | 10.0 | 27.0 | 44.0 | 15.0 | 4.0 | 100.0 |
| | 20 | 54 | 88 | 30 | 8 | 200 |
| h. are surveys carried out to ask for the opinions/attitudes of parents? | 7.0 | 28.0 | 52.5 | 11.5 | 1.0 | 100.0 |
| | 14 | 56 | 105 | 23 | 2 | 200 |

Table 6. How often on average (in the current academic year) do teachers in your school ask parents to:

| | At least once in two weeks | At least once a month | At least once a quarter | At least once a semester | Never | Don't know | Total |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| a. participate in organizing school/classroom ceremonies? | 1.0 2 | 13.5 27 | 47.5 95 | 32.5 65 | 4.5 9 | 1.0 2 | 100.0 200 |
| b. participate in organizing social activities at school/class level? | 1.0 2 | 10.0 20 | 29.0 58 | 41.5 83 | 17.0 34 | 1.5 3 | 100.0 200 |
| c. provide teaching assistance to teachers? | 0.5 1 | 9.0 18 | 22.0 44 | 33.5 67 | 33.0 66 | 2.0 4 | 100.0 200 |
| d. organize a school/classroom support group? | | 9.5 19 | 18.0 36 | 29.0 58 | 39.0 78 | 4.5 9 | 100.0 200 |
| e. sponsor activities carried out at school/classroom level? | 1.0 2 | 10.5 21 | 19.0 38 | 43.5 87 | 24.0 48 | 2.0 4 | 100.0 200 |
| f. fund-raise for school? | 0.5 1 | 9.0 18 | 21.0 42 | 46.0 92 | 22.5 45 | 1.0 2 | 100.0 200 |
| g. help other parents with supporting their | 0.5 | 8.5 | 15.0 | 37.0 | 35.5 | 3.5 | 100.0 |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|----------------|
| children's education? | 1 | 17 | 30 | 74 | 71 | 7 | 200 |
| h. represent the school at events? | 1.5 (3) | 6.5 (13) | 17.5 (35) | 46.5 (93) | 25.5 (51) | 2.5 (5) | 100.0 (200) |

Two survey questions relate to barriers and problems (1) in schools *communicating with* parents, and (2) in schools *offering support to* parents. In relation to (1), principals see three main barriers: parents' lack of interest, limited time, and lack of communication skills, with "lack of parents' interest" being the greatest obstacle. Some also mentioned that teachers are overloaded with work and that they lack the training and skills to communicate effectively with parents. In relation to (2), principals think they do not have the resources or the methodology to provide support to parents.

Thus, principals consider that the blame for a lack of communication lies mostly with *the parents*, because they are not interested in being involved. [There is definitely some bias here on the side of the principals, in that (generally) they did not consider that the school itself was at fault, and certainly not the teachers. This may be because traditionally the "school climate" is created by the school principal him/herself, without much reference to other stakeholders outside the school.]

Three further questions relate to the area of school management: (1) how much do parents influence the day-to-day life of the school; (2) how much influence do Parents' Council members have, and (3) how much the School Board intervenes in various aspects of the education process. On question (1), about half of the principals think their influence is "partial" and about one-quarter think their influence is "small". However, parents do seem to have some influence on the decisions made at classroom level (composite average of 3.01), decisions made at school level (2.93) and in the development or improvement of school rules (2.81). The least influence parents have is over the hiring and firing of teachers, in setting priorities for the school budget, in the choice of textbooks and other instruction materials, and in the evaluation of teacher performance.

On questions (2) and (3) -- the influence of the Parents' Council and the School Board -- **Tables 7 and 8** show the quantitative data obtained:

Table 7: How much does the Parents' Committee influence the following areas in the daily life of your school?

| | To a great extent | Some | Little | Not at all | Don't know | Refused | Total |
|--|-------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|----------|--------------|
| a. Pedagogical methods used by teachers. | 26.5 53 | 46.5 93 | 17.0 34 | 8.5 17 | 1.5 3 | | 100.0 200 |
| b. Content of lessons. | 4.0 8 | 22.0 44 | 21.5 43 | 52.0 104 | 0.5 1 | | 100.0 200 |
| c. The planning of extra-curricular activities. | 17.5 35 | 46.0 92 | 20.0 40 | 15.0 30 | 1.0 2 | 0.5 1 | 100.0 200 |
| d. The planning of school infrastructure development. | 21.0 42 | 45.0 90 | 23.5 47 | 9.5 19 | 1.0 2 | | 100.0 200 |
| e. Helping students to value education. | 38.0 76 | 44.5 89 | 14.0 28 | 3.0 6 | 0.5 1 | | 100.0 200 |
| f. Facilitating increased involvement of parents in school life. | 30.0 60 | 52.5 105 | 13.5 27 | 3.5 7 | 0.5 1 | | 100.0 200 |

Table 7 clearly identifies the areas of influence of the Parents Councils: helping students to value education (3.18), facilitating increased involvement of parents in school life (3.10) and the pedagogical methods used by teachers (2.93). In 59% of cases, the school principals said that the Parents' Council had only "partial" influence, with the least impact

on the planning of school infrastructure or extra-curricular activities; and had “no influence at all” over the content of the lessons or instructional process.

Table 8: Are, in the case of your school, the members of the Parents’ Council entitled to:

| | Without restriction | By invitation only | In no circumstances | Don’t know | Refused | Total |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|------------|----------|--------------|
| a. participate at meetings where school level decisions are taken? | 14.5 29 | 84.5 169 | 0.5 1 | 0.5 1 | | 100.0 200 |
| b. actively participate in the elaboration of new school policies/strategies | 21.0 42 | 73.0 146 | 5.5 11 | 0.5 1 | | 100.0 200 |
| c. initiate the modification of an existing school policies? | 29.0 58 | 58.0 116 | 11.0 22 | 1.5 3 | 0.5 1 | 100.0 200 |
| d. initiate the adoption of new policies? | 33.0 66 | 57.5 115 | 7.5 15 | 1.5 3 | 0.5 1 | 100.0 200 |
| e. prevent the adoption of rules they disagree with? | 37.5 75 | 48.5 97 | 10.0 20 | 4.0 8 | | 100.0 200 |

Table 8 shows principals’ perceptions of the way School Councils work. Councils have two or three parent-members, depending on the size of the school. Principals believe that parents may participate in this body “only by invitation”, regardless of the subject of discussion. Parental influence is further limited by “restrictions” to the types of issues about which they are allowed to voice an opinion. Parent members of the School Board may participate “only by invitation” in meetings where school-level decisions are taken (in

84.5% of schools, or 169 principals), and only to some extent play an active part in the elaboration of new school policies/strategies (73% of schools, 146 principals).

Summary of conclusions (Macedonia)

On average, the access of parents to school decisions -- even for members of the School Boards -- is “restricted”: and, combined with the “partial” influence of parents in general, this leaves the impression that schools are not open enough towards vital factors in children’s lives and education – most importantly, the parents.

There are no un-surmountable barriers to greater inclusion of parents in school life. There are, of course, some obstacles but they can be overcome if there is a will to do so. However, in the view of principals, it is the *parents* who are mostly to blame for non-communication. There seems to be little understanding that the school, and the teachers, also have to make more of an effort to involve parents.

In fact, there *are* positive conditions to increase parents’ participation, but they are not well used. Although there is a good normative framework for inclusion, in practice it is not made into an explicit part of the school’s strategy. Implementation is limited to basic and formal communication; as such, it does not contribute to enriching the educational process and better achievement by students.

The question is, “*Yes, parents are needed, but for what?*” The conceptual framework for parents’ inclusion intends something bigger and more inventive than is now the case. Unfortunately, most principals believe that parents are needed only in the “upbringing” part of education, but not in the “instruction” part. But parents cannot fulfil their “upbringing” role if they are left to do it alone; nor can schools ignore the impact of a child’s home life on his/her educational success. What is needed is a constructive partnership, based on frequent communication and mutual understanding and support.

The best principals use *all* the potential resources in their community: parents, the local community, the business community, civil society, NGOs, etc. Closer co-operation can help create effective, efficient and democratically governed schools that are fit to develop each child’s educational potential.

MOLDOVA

Background (Moldova)

Article No. 60 of the Educational Law stipulates that parents or guardians have the right to:

- a) choose their children's educational institution, and the language of instruction;
- b) require that children's rights and liberties are respected in the school;
- c) be informed about the educational process, instructional content, and results of their children's evaluation.

Parents can participate by setting up a *Parents' Committee* for their child's class. This has proved to be an effective way to stimulate parents' involvement. Presidents of Parents' Committees also meet at school level in the representative *Parents' Council*. This body has a number of duties stipulated in the regulations of Moldova's pre-university institutions, as follows:

- d) to support the education of children within the family, ensuring that conditions exist for children to study as appropriate to their grade level;
- e) to serve as representatives on some administrative and consultative bodies of the educational institution.

Parents or guardians have the responsibility to ensure the child's enrolment in compulsory education (state or private), or to provide for the child's education at home; and create adequate conditions for studying, development, extra-curricular activities and self-education. Parents or tutors who do not contribute to the child's training and education are punishable by law.

Summary of findings (Moldova)

Twelve regions were selected for this survey. Regions were determined based on the number students in primary schools and by geographical location (urban/rural). Data regarding the school distribution was collected and weighted in relation to the total number of schools (as a percentage). With regard to the schools included in the sample, this research targeted gymnasium-type (grades 5-9) schools; at this level, there are [generally speaking] more rural than urban schools.

In total, 296 directors of pre-university general-culture educational institutions were interviewed; the schools were 89.5% rural and 10.5% urban. As for the number of students, 82.8% of the schools were *small* schools, including rural

ones, which have up to 225 students. They constitute about 66% of all schools in Moldova. Most small schools have only one class per grade. *Medium*-size schools (16.2% of the sample) have between 226 and 450 students. They may have more than one class per grade level. Smaller schools have, in general, closer contact with parents and families.

School Directors

The principals interviewed have the following characteristics: 73% of them are women, and 27% are men; 8.8% of principals have more than 25 years' experience on the job, 32.1% have between 13 and 25 years of experience, 28.4% have between 5 and 13 years, and 30.7% between 3 and 5 years. Most principals interviewed (65.9%) have been in education for more than 25 years, and the average length of service is 29 years. As a group, therefore, these principals have a great deal of knowledge of the system and of education management.

Teachers

Here, our sample had these characteristics: in 119 schools (40.2% of the total) the number of titular full teachers is fewer than 10, which means that more than 40% of all classes are taught by teachers whose working hours exceed the norm, i.e. that > 40 % of classes are taught by substitute teachers. As a result, they have only limited time to get to know their students, to discuss their progress with parents, or to organize extra-curricular activities.

Parents

According to 62.5% of the principals, 25% of the families whose children are enrolled in their schools have a stable source of income. The remaining 37.5% of principals said that more than 25% of their students had one parent working abroad. A substantial number of students came from single-parent families, or have both parents working abroad. The overall picture is that more than 50% of the sample schools have difficulties in establishing relations with more than 25% of the parents.

Summary of conclusions (Moldova)

Communication between school and parents

Schools communicate with parents mostly through meetings. Many of these meetings are home visits by teachers and by auxiliary didactic staff (64.9% - once a month, 26.5% - once a semester). Nearly all (95%) schools organize meetings at least once per semester for

parents, school management, and teachers. The principals of rural schools are less satisfied with these meetings than those from urban areas.

In general, about 50%-75% of the total number of parents attend .Considering that about 25% of children come from families in which one or both parents are working abroad, or from a family that does not have a stable income or that cannot spare the time, the attendance rate is very good, and it shows that parents are open to working with the school.

Principals say that they find it most difficult to make contact with (1) parents with a history of violence, alcohol and drug abuse (59.0%), (2) parents who are working abroad or who live in other regions (48.6%); and (3) parents who are not interested in their children's education (38.8%). Socially disadvantaged (poor) families are also hard to reach, according to 36.4% of principals.

Most schools (81.4%) have a strategy to ensure communication with parents; this consists mostly of organizing meetings, on fostering teacher-parent dialogue, and on involving parents in school activities. Only in a minority of cases (39%) was there any mention of efforts to improve parenting skills or help parents support their child's learning.

The conclusion is that schools do try to keep parents informed about school-related issues and about their children's learning achievement. However, the flow of information is, in most cases, *school-to-parent*, with little evidence of *parent-to-school* communication or effective dialogue.

Parents' participation

From the principals' point of view, the most effective ways to stimulate parents' involvement are (i) extra-curricular activities and various trips, (ii) activities related to improving conditions in schools, donations of equipment etc., and also (iii) meetings with parents. Principals do *not* consider it useful for parents to be more closely involved in matters pertaining to student/teacher relationships, or in connection with the curriculum, policy debates or seminars (including the creation of Parents' Councils). In only 21% of the schools were parents encouraged to set up a Parents' Council, while 20% requested direct financial contributions from parents.

However, 82.8% of principals were able to describe specific instances where successful school-parent partnerships had been created. Most frequently mentioned were parents being involved in capital repairs in the school (41.1%); in 8.2% of schools this was done as part of a project funded by the Social Investment Fund in Moldova.

Support offered by school to parents

In our research, principals were asked to evaluate the utility of six types of support given to parents. Offers of help vary from case to case, depending on the family's problems and the

most relevant form of assistance. Based on the results, we conclude that more attention and support are offered to one-parent families and to divorced parents. Also, families with problems of domestic violence, families that are not interested in their child's education, and families that are members of the Parents' Councils are receiving more support than others.

Principals' attitude towards parents' involvement in school life

The direction, intensity and quality of parental influence on the school determine (and are determined by) the principal's perceptions about school-family relations, and by the importance that they give to parents' role in the education of children.

That schools do benefit from parental involvement is well appreciated by principals: 87.1% of those interviewed consider that parents' activism contribute "to a large extent" and "to some extent" to improving their behaviour and attitude towards the school. Moreover, 86.1% believe that parents' involvement improves the school's climate; 86 % think that it increases the level of support offered by parents to the school.; and 82.1% say that it improves students' performance and achievement.

In particular, principals mentioned the following as being useful in improving student learning:

- Informing parents about ways to create a supportive home climate – 88.3%;
- Parent counselling - 87.1%;
- Organizing sessions to show parents how they can assist their children with homework – 79.5%;
- Creating support groups for parents of children with specific problems, behaviour etc.) – 74,7%.

Barriers to providing support to parents

In the principals' view, the main barriers to the school's ability to offer parents suitable and timely support are these: 68% believe that parents are *too busy* to get involved in parental counseling services; 63 % say parents are *not interested*; and 60% say the school does not have the necessary *resources*. Two of these three barriers are beyond the school's control; thus, in the opinion of principals, the main obstacles are on the parents' side and *not* related to teachers' lack of time or skill to offer support.

Barriers to school-parent communication

Again, principals think that *parents* – rather than the school – are the main obstacles to effective communication. Parents' lack of time is considered by 65.2% of principals as the biggest barrier; 35.4% think that teachers' workload is an important barrier. Parents' lack of interest was mentioned by 63.3% of principals, and only 11.1% believe that lack of teachers' interest is also a big barrier.

Generalizing these results, it seems that principals are tempted to present the school as an institution that does its best to efficiently communicate with parents. Most of the obstacles and barriers, in their opinion, come from outside the school; and they do not consider that they should make more of an effort to improve school-family communication.

Parents' involvement in school administration

Most school managers agree about the positive effects of parents' involvement in school governance, especially in connection with improving educational quality. Only in 28 schools (out of 296), did principals minimize parents' role in education of their children, and even ignored parents' legal rights, for example by having no parent members on the Administrative Council of the school. In urban areas, more institutions have no parent representatives on the Administrative Council, compared to rural areas.

Parents' committees in the sample schools have the right, **without restrictions**, to participate to the meetings in which important decisions are made (70.1%); to reject some rules (59.6%); or to be actively involved in elaborating some new strategies/policies (54.8%). But they are **excluded** from making any proposals to modify an existing policy (in 13.1% of schools); from rejecting adoption of rules they do not agree with (13.1%); or to propose new policies (19.3% of schools).

Clearly, principals accept parents' participation in the decision-making process, but less so when it comes to initiating change, or to the development of strategies or policies. It seems that principals do not believe that parents have the necessary skill or competence to make policy decisions.

However, parents are considered to have a “really important” or “very important” role in making some decisions at the classroom level – 87.5%; making some decisions at the school level – 82.5%; planning school activities – 69.6%. Most principals do not want parents to be involved in the hiring and firing of teachers, or in selecting books and materials. Developing and modernizing policies and school regulations are considered by almost half of the principals as being the sole responsibility of the pedagogic staff, without parents' involvement; the other half believe that parents should be involved in these matters too.

When asked about important initiatives of Parents' Committees during the current school year, 77.4% of principals mentioned the following: 43.9% of initiatives were related to the school's or the class's "material basis". Maybe parents do not know other ways to participate; or maybe they are not allowed to be directly involved; or maybe principals do not see other ways for parents to be involved.

SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR MOLDOVA

Evaluating the impact of education reform, and principals' relations with local authorities

- Data collected in the course of this research show that 56.1% of school principals are satisfied with the *reform process*; 45.6% are satisfied "to some extent" and "to a large extent" with the co-operation with the Ministry of Education and with the support it provides. Only 30 principals (out of 296) are satisfied "to a large extent" with the school's infrastructure -- classrooms, buildings and equipment. According to some estimates made at the start of academic year 2007-2008, half the school furniture and equipment did not comply with health or safety norms.
- Schools in Moldova are going through a very difficult time in terms of *finance*. They have far fewer resources than they need for development, salaries and maintenance (heating, services, food and training). For example, in 2005, only 59% of the budgetary needs of schools were met by transfers from the state. This means that the deficit has to be made up by contributions from parents, local authorities, businesses, special fund-raising events, or foreign donors.
- A survey for the 2007/8 academic year shows that only 8.2% of principals considered that their budget was sufficient to pay all current invoices, and even allowed them to make some important investments. But for a considerable number of schools, the budget was insufficient; they hardly managed to pay their bills (35.6%), and approximately 6.5% could not meet their basic running costs.
- The relations between schools and local authorities were reported to be positive: 28% of school principals said they had established "very good" relations, and 59.5% that they had "rather good" relations. This is probably because schools rely heavily on municipal budgets for their funding. In only 12% of cases did principals say they did not have satisfactory relationships with local authorities.

- In terms of parents' participation in school life, our research shows that there are indeed problems but they can be resolved if both parties make a joint effort. The main issues are:
- cultural and socio-economic circumstances, characteristic of a long and difficult period of transition;
- lack of clarity about the division of roles and responsibilities between schools and families;
- insufficient transparency in decision-making, and a lack of trust between the partners;
- lack of will on the part of the school leadership (and of teachers and parents) to build sound partnerships for achieving common goals.

MONTENEGRO

Note: In Montenegro, the research was done by census (whole-population) rather than by sampling, because of the relatively small number of schools in the country..

The principals of 145 schools took part in the survey. Nearly all of these schools (143) have parent representatives serving on their *School Boards*, which is a positive result. However, 137 schools (94.5%) do not have a specific policy or strategy on communication with parents, and even *Parents' Councils* have influence only "to some extent". Their influence, according to the survey, is mostly in two areas: motivating parents to participate; and arranging extra-curricular activities. They have least influence on decisions relating to the education process itself.

Summary of findings (Montenegro)

Principals said they were very satisfied with parents' participation in the School Board. But this relates to parents' *attendance* at Board meetings, rather than to actual *contributions* to the work of the Board.

In most schools (almost 70%), school-parent communication is active throughout the school year. The most common means of communication are: *schools sending written evaluations of students' achievement to parents*, as well as *meetings organized by principals*.

Results show that principals are, generally speaking, satisfied with the communication between teaching staff and parents. More than half of the principals are "to some extent" satisfied with the communication between form teachers and parents, with more than 47% saying they were satisfied "to a large extent". Satisfaction with the communication between regular teachers and parents is slightly lower, but still very favourable. More than 58% of principals show satisfaction "to some extent", and almost 36% "to a large extent".

Half of the principals think that between 50 and 66% of parents attend meetings with form teachers: indeed 20% of principals believe that *more* than 66% attend these meetings. As for meetings with other teachers, almost 50% of principals think that between 50 and 66% of parents attend. Finally, more than over 40% of principals estimate that at least half of the parents regularly attend meetings with principals, although 25% of principals say this type of attendance is below 50%.

The most common topics discussed at meetings with parents are the following, in order of frequency:

grades (marks) and overall success of students

discipline and behaviour of students

the school curriculum

the school's equipment and working conditions

excursions and extra-curricular activities.

The principals state that the biggest barrier in communication is “*parents themselves*”: lack of interest, lack of time, and lack of parents’ communication skills. This implies that, in order to improve communication, parents themselves must take part of the responsibility.

Hardest to reach (according to principals) are these (in hierarchical order): those with lower levels of education; those lacking in interest and responsibility; those whose children have behavioural problems; those whose children have learning problems.

As for efforts made by the school to stimulate parent participation, the most frequently mentioned are requests to parents to participate in *organizing social activities at school/classroom level*, and to take part in *organizing school/classroom ceremonies*. Therefore, schools mostly invite parents to be involved in extra-curricular activities.

The following three school activities that most successfully engage parents are, in order of importance:: events, celebrations and extra-curricular activities; maintenance of school and school yard; organization of excursions and students’ free time.

Out of 145 principals, 121 (83.4%) can recall instances where successful school- parent communication has been achieved. Most (51%) say that parents’ help with school renovation is both the most useful and the most frequent. Other examples are organization of events, celebrations and extra-curricular activities in general (22 principals), and financial (or in-kind) contributions to the school (21 principals). Eleven principals also mentioned organization of educational workshops as examples of successful co-operation.

All these findings show that parents are mostly engaged in extra-curricular activities. The key question is, are parents are involved mainly in extra-curricular activities because it is *their* preference, or because principals and teachers prefer to keep parents’ involvement limited in this way? Based on research conducted through group interviews with

principals¹⁰, we believe that, in fact, the problem is *not* related to parents, but rather to the principals and teaching staff, i.e. that the school (as an institution) invites only this type of involvement, being less welcoming or encouraging when it comes to teaching and decision-making. .

Principals think that schools can help parents in various ways to improve their children's learning, specifically by providing parents with information on creating a good learning environment at home, and by organizing sessions to help parents assist their children with homework.

However, schools vary in the extent to which they actually *provide* these services to parents. Where they are provided, services most frequently mentioned are: advice on helping children with homework; advice on creating a positive learning environment; and organizing parent support groups.

As for barriers that limit the ability of the school to offer parenting services, principals identify three key factors: parents are too busy to be involved in school-based parenting services; parents are not interested; and the school does not have the resources to develop and run such services. Thus, most principals think that (to a large extent) parents themselves are to blame for lack of participation.

When it comes to parents' involvement in various aspects of decision-making, however, principals' attitudes are very different. Parents are welcome to participate when some decisions of a *general* character or in relation to *extra-curricular activities* are made, but they do not wish them to be involved in matters related to *teaching, personnel decisions, or the use of school funds*.

Indeed, in most cases parents are expected to participate in decisions at the school level "by invitation only". This means that parents can participate "without restriction" in only a relatively small number of cases.

¹⁰ See the report: 'Promotion of inclusion and quality in education in South-East Europe'; group interview, 18th of February 2008; Forum MNE i CEPS

The Parents' Council, too, has only limited influence on the way school-level decisions are made. Principals say Councils have influence only 'to some extent', and then mostly in issues related to extra-curricular activities, not in matters pertaining to education. Asked to identify the most significant initiatives by the Parents' Council in the current school year, 78 principals (out of 145) responded that initiatives related to renovating or repairing the school or school grounds were the most important.

Principals believe that parents are mostly influential in at the classroom level, but even here it is limited. They are not consulted in matters related to the development or change of school policies and regulations, and only partly in the planning of social activities. One conclusion that could be drawn is that principals will engage parents only when *they* consider it useful, not otherwise. In short, *principals' attitudes towards parents' influence and participation in school life are entirely unsatisfactory.*

The main reasons why parents do not get more involved in school life have already been mentioned: they are too busy, they are not interested, or they lack the education or skills to participate meaningfully.

SPECIFIC ISSUES FOR MONTENEGRO

In relation to the overall governance of the school, principals say that their "satisfaction" is greater than their "dissatisfaction". In particular, they are most satisfied with the co-operation with the Ministry of Education and Science, and to a somewhat lesser extent with the support they receive from the Ministry. Although this finding may well show that the co-operation is, in fact, good, it could also be that principals are dependent for their appointment on the Ministry, and that therefore their positive response is politically prudent.

Finally, more than half the principals are satisfied with the educational reform, and with the impact that the reform has had on their school. However, 10% of respondents are "not at all satisfied" with the educational reform.

Principals generally express major satisfaction with the institutional, programmatic and reform co-operation with the authorities, and moderate satisfaction with material resources allocated to the schools.

ROMANIA

Background

Stimulating parents' involvement in school life is one of the common objectives of the educational policies designed and implemented in Romania in the last twelve years. But the results were not as expected: participation levels have dropped year after year, and there are no signs that this tendency will change in the near future.

There are multiple reasons for parents' lack of interest. The cultural background is an important factor: Romanians' level of participation in *any* kind of voluntary activity is among the lowest in the European Union, with only 5% of the population involved in voluntary work. In addition, the school and the community had separate paths in the past, both before the Second World War and during the communist régime. The people were told it was better not to interfere in the education system than to take an active role. The idea of *partnership* is quite new and it will take some time for these mentalities to change. Last but not least, the school itself was not prepared for a closer partnership with the local community. However, as decentralization advances slowly in education, it becomes ever more important to foster closer relations between school and community, and to encourage parents to take a more prominent role in school life.

In this context, the research undertaken as part of the project *Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in South East Europe* is timely and appropriate. The project is financially supported by *Open Society Institute* and it is implemented by a consortium of NGOs from eight South European Countries. The Romanian partner is *Center Education 2000+*. What follows is a summary of the findings of the research.

Methodology (Romania)

The research undertaken in Romania consisted of two phases: preliminary qualitative research (two focus-groups¹¹) and quantitative research (survey). The results of the

¹¹ The focus group results were summarized in Crighton, J. "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE": Summary of Focus Group Discussion Reports. Budapest, OSEP-SEE: May 2008.

qualitative part were used to calibrate the instruments of the quantitative research. The decisions on sampling frame, sampling design, and questionnaire design as well as interview topics and guidelines were set by the central (international) research team.

Survey topics were divided into four sections: current state of the education system, education system reform, community involvement in school life, and parents' participation. The survey used a random mono-stadial stratified sample consisting of 670 principals from schools with grades I-VIII. It is representative of the target population (6,135 schools with grades I-VIII) with an error margin of +/- 3% at 95% confidence level.

The face-to-face interviews with principals were carried out by professional operators between May 5th and May 25th. Data gathering and data entry were provided by a professional company, *IMAS – Marketing and Surveys Institute*.

Summary of findings (Romania)

The majority of school principals (85%) say they have a “strategy” to communicate with all parents. However, when asked about the components of this strategy, less than 10% were able to provide any concrete examples. The majority – two-thirds of those that have a strategy – mention various ways in which they communicate with parents: written notes, home visits etc. About 18% are not able to indicate any component of the strategy, or refused to answer.

Parents play a passive role, and communication is mostly limited to subjects such as students' results and discipline issues. The most frequent methods of communication are reactive, place parents in a passive role, and do not address *all* parents: meetings (mainly when the parents are invited) and written notes; home visits come third, and other tools such as opinion polls or newsletters are used to a lesser degree.

Participation at principal-parents meetings is quite high, the principals say. On average, more than 50% of the parents attend, but it is not clear whether this refers to the total number of parents in the school or to the number of *invited* parents. Only 40% of the

schools use at least two communication instruments monthly, but in their cases the number of parents attending the meetings is significantly higher. The content of the discussions revolves around the students' problems and results; 71% of the principals mention as the most frequent subject either students' results (40%) or disciplinary problems (31%). Discipline, order and violence were mentioned by 92% of the principals interviewed as being in the "top three" discussion topics, which makes them the most important.

Asked about obstacles to relevant communication, principals are placing the blame on parents: parents lack interest, skills, and time to get involved in school life, principals say. They are reluctant to consider other obstacles that may be the fault of the school or the teachers.

Similar answers were given to questions about what categories of parents are harder to interact with. Parents with low levels of education and/or marginal status are mentioned in the first place by 42% of the respondents, 37% of the principals are referring to parents living abroad on a temporary basis, 32% blame parents or guardians of children coming from disorganized or large families, 20% mention ethnic minorities (primarily Roma). As expected, the answers correlate with the social situation in the community: migrants are more frequent mentioned in communities with high migrations rates, Roma parents were there are Roma communities, etc.

Romanian schools offer limited opportunities for parents to support school activities. Parents' involvement in school life is mostly limited to social and cultural events, and they are rarely involved in educational activities. Two-thirds of the respondents say that in their schools the parents have never been asked to offer advice to teachers, but in 97% of the schools the parents are asked to organize a school ceremony and in 95% they are invited to participate at organizing social event at least once each semester.

Principals think that students' results would improve if the school would conduct parental counselling activities. The survey asked for principal's reactions to several suggestions about counselling services (organized sessions to help parents assist their children with homework), materials helping to assist children with homework, materials helping to monitor children's homework, information on creating a home learning environment, counselling service, parent support groups. For each of these suggestions, least two out of three principals agreed that it would contribute to improving students' performance. But only half of the schools in the survey are putting into practice at least two of these activities at least once a semester, and one-third of the schools have never organized support groups and never tried to teach parents how to monitor their children's homework.

Parents' involvement in decision-making at school level it is another two-sided story. In 94% of the schools in the survey, the parents are represented in the *Council of Administration*, which sounds good but raises a question mark, because by law the parents' representatives should be a part of the CA in *every* school. Generally, the principals are satisfied with parents' participation at CA meetings (87% of principals).

In most schools, the members of the *Parents' Committee* have good opportunities to give their input when important decisions are discussed, and to initiate new policies and regulations. Three out of four principals think that parents' involvement in decision-making in general is important, but when asked about specific domains, we find again the same distinction: "*parents should be involved in organizing social activities, but not in making decisions about the content of education.*"

Speaking about members of the *Parents' Committee*, the principals think they have great influence in helping students to value education and the planning of extra-curricular activities, but little if any influence when discussing pedagogical methods used by teachers or content of lessons (only 4% of the principals think parents can influence content of lessons). These results are consistent with the answers principals give when asked about the extent of influence of parents in general.

Summary of recommendations (Romania)

The general picture shows **a growing divide between school and community**. Principals accuse parents of a lack of interest, but at the same time they do little to involve parents in school life. Most principals say they are in favour of parents' involvement in decision-making but when asked about concrete areas, they prefer to keep parents away from important decisions about the content of education, human resource management, and budget. The areas where the parents are welcome to participate are social and cultural activities, and implementing school regulations. Most principals claim that they have a "school strategy" for parental involvement, but are unable to give concrete answers about what this actually means. The nature of the communication tools used by schools place parents in a passive role.

These are the general trends shown by the statistical analyses. We must, of course, take into consideration the particular design of the sample: 73% of the schools with grades I-VIII are located in rural areas, and they tend to be small. Data suggest that the situation in urban areas and with bigger schools is different. Also, it is important to mention that there are schools that are doing better than others in terms of communications and parents' involvement.

Based on the findings of this research, several policy recommendations were made that are worth following up:

- continuing research to add the perspective of the other stakeholders: parents, students, local authorities, NGOs, other community actors;
- increasing school capacity to interact with the community, and to adapt itself to the community;

- designing and implementing communication strategies for the national education system and for each school;
- creating a collection of good practices, and disseminating it nation wide;
- offering advice and counseling to parents as part of the school's regular responsibilities, and allocating resources for it.

SERBIA

Background (Serbia)

Despite legal obligations and the well-established importance of parental participation, in practice this often comes down to either using parents “just for show” or allowing them to have a voice in school decision-making only in relation to less important aspects of school life. Principals of 16 Belgrade primary schools (focus groups, held in March 2008¹²) said that parental participation (with the exception of School Board and Parents’ Council) was limited to activities like school refurbishment, organisation of some extra-curricular activities, or financial support for schools. Principals are of the opinion that there is no true participation of parents in schools, and they think that parents themselves are the cause of this problem: they are not interested, or they see themselves as “inspectors” rather than partners. They want participation in school life, but without any responsibilities. Principals do concede, however, that the way schools are organised -- as well as unwillingness of some of their colleagues and teachers -- are also obstacles to meaningful parental involvement in school life.

The basic goal of this survey is gaining insight into principals’ views of parental participation in school life as well as actions taken at school to encourage this co-operation. The survey seeks to answer the following questions:

- I.** In what way(s) are parents involved in various aspects of school life, and what possibilities for participation does the school offer in practice?
- II.** What are the views of school management (specifically, the principal) with respect to parental participation in school life?
- III.** Which factors render the implementation of principles of parental participation in school more difficult?

¹² See Crighton, J. “Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE”: Summary of Focus Group Discussion Reports. Budapest, OSEP-SEE: May 2008.

IV. What is the actual participatory practice in school, and what influence do parents have in the decision-making process?

Methodology (Serbia)

In Serbia, the survey sample comprised principals from 200 primary schools (a total of 200 principals). The sample was stratified by region (Belgrade – 14.5%, Eastern Serbia – 29.5%, Western Serbia – 26% and Vojvodina – 30%) and by type of settlement in which the school is located (urban – 49.5% and rural – 50.5%). While most principals have long-standing experience in the field of education (between 10 and 30 years of service), only 3% of principals have been in this position for longer than 10 years, and most (63%) have less than five years' experience as principals.

With regard to *school size and number of students*, 23% of the schools were *extremely small* (up to 200 students); 47% were *small schools* (between 200 and 600 students), 12.5% were *medium-sized schools* (between 600 and 800 students), 14% were *large schools* (between 800 and 1,200 students); 2% of the schools in the sample were so-called '*gigantic*' schools (over 1,200 students).

Instruments used: For the survey, a *questionnaire* was used which the survey team compiled on the basis of focus-group interviews¹³ with principals in the given region, as well as relevant literature on parental participation in school life. The questionnaire did not contain additional questions concerning the specific features of the context in Serbia.

Procedure: The survey was conducted during May and June 2008. Principals of sampled schools were contacted in person, and interviewed. The GfK Agency was tasked with conducting the interviews and collecting the data.

Summary of findings (Serbia)

¹³ A summary of focus group discussions can be found in Crighton, J. "Advancing Educational Inclusion and Quality in SEE": Summary of Focus Group Discussion Reports. Budapest, OSEP-SEE: May 2008.

I. Communication between school and parents: different levels of participation

Very few schools have a defined strategy for communication with parents based on the premise that parents should be actively involved, such as: *regular informing of parents, inclusion of all parents in problem-solving, and a climate of co-operation and mutual respect*. However, while schools say that “participation” is the basic principle on which communication with parents is based, in reality parents do not have many opportunities for participation. Most principals say that parents are informed or consulted no more than once per semester; very few say that this occurs more often.

When it comes to parents’ inclusion in their child’s education, the situation is similar, i.e. such opportunities do not occur often in Serbian schools. In principals’ view, the best thing is to involve parents in activities which are not *directly related to formal school curriculum, teaching and learning processes*, or to essential aspects of school organisation. This means parents are involved in extra-curricular activities, renovating school space, and financial issues (e.g., humanitarian actions and raising funds for some school activities). This may point to a mere ‘ornamental’ or (at best) auxiliary role of parents in school life.

One encouraging finding is that principals, to a degree, also mention parents’ inclusion in projects and various educational events (educational workshops for parents), which points to a willingness to inform and educate parents about issues that are relevant to them. This, in turn, may stimulate their inclusion in school life.

II. Principals’ views on parental participation in school life

Principals’ workload. Most principals (85%) have no teaching duties, and therefore they have relatively little day-to-day contact with the parents of students in their classes. A tiny percentage teach less than 25% of their time teaching (5.5%), and a negligible percentage (2%) spend more than a half of their working hours teaching.

Principals’ views are divided in the way they view the level of influence that parents have on various aspects of school life. Almost a half of them believe that parents *do* have an influence, while a slightly smaller (but still significant) number of principals believe that parents have very little influence. The majority of principals agree that parental participation is not necessary in areas like teaching process and organisation of the school.

While almost all principals agree that parental participation contributes to a more positive atmosphere at school, improves parents’ attitude towards the school in terms of better support and partnership, and improves students’ performance, most principals limit parental participation to organizing auxiliary activities. Verbal support for parental participation is also reflected principals’ views on the importance of parents’ inclusion in the process of education of their children: they believe that the role of school in ensuring such a support is very important, and yet parents are given very few possibilities to call on the school’s support and get involved in their children’s education.

III. Barriers to parental participation

In the principals' view, the biggest obstacle in communication are parents themselves, i.e. their lack of interest in working with the school and lack of communication skills. Parents with whom communication is the most difficult are: *uneducated parents, uninterested/irresponsible parents* and *biased parents*, as well as parents of lower socio-economic status, working parents, and excessively ambitious parents.

Parents were also described as the main obstacle to the schools' efforts to provide parents with support (un-interested, or too busy). A smaller number of principals mentioned the school itself as an obstacle, i.e. lack of school resources required for organisation and implementation of support programmes; and sometimes the teachers may be a barrier, for example because of a lack of time or skills to work on support programmes.

When asked if the school has in place some defined procedures intended to encourage participation, most principals cite actions aimed at changing parental attitudes: *individual approach to parents* (frequent calls, interviews, advisory work), involvement of *expert professional agencies* and their contact with parents, *official invitation* (by post or telephone) to an interview; and -- to a lesser extent -- actions related to changes in the school system, for example *inclusion of parents in different seminars, educational events and projects*.

IV. Participatory practice

In Serbia, parental participation in the decision-making process takes place through the *Parents' Council* and the *School Board*. While the Parents' Council, according to principals, has significant and extensive powers, the question is whether these are actually translated into practice, or simply remain a dead letter. The examples cited above suggest that the participation of parents is considerably limited, whereas their influence is assessed as being small and restricted to secondary areas of school life. This is partly corroborated by principals' standpoints vis-à-vis the Parents' Council's possibility to exert influence on various aspects of school life: *the Council is not exerting any significant influence on the curriculum, the method of work and school infrastructure, nor does it influence other parents in terms of their greater participation*.

The most successful actions carried out by Parents' Councils, according to principals, are *school refurbishment, i.e. renovating the school and school yard*, as well as actions related to *safety and organisation of extra-curricular activities*. This finding confirms the role that parents are given within the school structure: auxiliary activities and extra-curricular activities, but certainly not those concerning the fundamental organisation of schools or the educational process itself.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations (Serbia)

Principals believe that parental participation is an important part of school life, and that participation contributes to a positive atmosphere at school, motivation of other parents to participate, and students' performance. However, participation in our schools mostly boils down to auxiliary activities that are not directly related to the core education process or school organisation.

Participation is most successful and yields best results in the area of extra-curricular activities (outings, excursions, school celebrations, etc.), school refurbishment, and various humanitarian activities.

The biggest obstacles to effective participation, in the principals' view, are parents' lack of interest, willingness and competence for participation. This effectively creates "a vicious circle of non-participation", given that principals' perception of parents also has an impact on expectations from parents, which in turn define and determine parents' behaviour (the so-called self-fulfilling prophecy effect).

The school system as a whole fails to encourage or stimulate participation, or limits and restricts it to passive participation and 'ornamental' activities. Therefore parents cannot see the point of participation or the positive effect that it may have; and in the end, their passivity is then interpreted as "lack of interest".

Participation as a possibility has not become an integral part of school practice. Given the importance of parents' active involvement in relation to the quality of the education process, and indeed to other aspects of school-community co-operation, it is essential that participation be promoted and encouraged. This will require carefully designed long-term projects within which parents are offered the most diverse scope of activities. Opportunities must be created for parents to participate according to their preferences, time available, and capabilities/skills .

The school must play a crucial role in designing such programmes, particularly the teachers who are most often in touch with parents. Teachers have to be convinced that parents' involvement is *important*, not only for the school but for the teachers' own work and for the intellectual and emotional development of children. Teachers must be encouraged (and reminded!) to think about ways in which they can involve parents, and motivate them to become an active partner in the education process.

However, in order to bring about substantial change, *all partners in the life of the school must change together*. Teachers' attitudes and values, the school system's values, norms and procedures, and the parents' self-confidence in playing a more prominent part must all change in order to create a sustainable partnership. Education of teachers is not enough if the school remains closed to new approaches and ideas. Participation of parents should become a routine, integral part of school practice, not an isolated case which occurs only thanks to the good will of individual stakeholders.

